Book Reviews

R. Del Prete (ed.), *Knowledge, words and worlds: Italian education between continuity and change (19th century-21st century)*, 2 Volumes., Benevento, Kinetès, 2020.

A recent trend in many studies about the history of schools adopts a micro-analytical approach in order to analyse single school realities, illustrating their structural aspects, functional mechanisms and operational modes. This type of investigation, however, is either sterile or insufficient to shed light on the typical characteristics of the educational systems and the evolutionary dynamics that have marked their history. Editorial initiatives such as the one under consideration are, therefore, particularly welcome, since, by placing the analysis of institutions, segments, and sectors of education in Italy over the last two centuries in a comparative framework, they allow us to perceive more clearly their lines of development, regulatory-institutional apparatus, and contexts of reference. In this specific case, moreover, among the thirty authors who contributed to the volume (two thirds of whom are female, confirming the undisputed greater sensitivity of women towards this historiographic theme) there are some of the most important researchers specialized in this sector, often with years of fieldwork behind them.
Within the vast array of contributions, which are extremely heterogeneous in terms of geographical contexts and characteristics of the educational institutions analysed (ranging from nautical education to midwives' schools, from the training of nuns to choreographic high schools), it is possible to identify a basic element, which is, – as illustrated in the Preface authoritatively written by a specialist such as Angelo Bianchi – the willingness to focus the attention on the "long and fruitful path that the history of education has taken, at least since the second half of the last century, and the wealth of results it has been able to achieve". In the two centuries forming the chronological background of the volume, Italy saw a real educational revolution which enabled the structuring of a widespread network of school institutes, the formation of a large teaching staff aware of its tasks, the creation of a ramified managerial and inspection apparatus, and the affirmation of the absolute protagonism of the

state in the management of the educational system, with the increasingly marked marginalisation of the Church, once the holder of a sort of monopoly in public education. At the same time, on the side of the users of school services, there was a progressive, though slow, spread of literacy, which led our country to gradually emancipate itself from a condition that, at the first post-unification census, had placed our Country alongside the most backward southern and eastern areas of the European continent. All these phenomena can be read between the lines in the volume even though the path that emerges from all the contributions is not entirely linear but is in fact characterized by obstacles and tortuousness. In effect, the detail of the various situations of a multifaceted school system also highlights, along with progress and achievements, elements of backwardness, limitations, and dysfunctions. The volume contains praiseworthy initiatives for the rehabilitation and professional integration of abandoned children; rigorous academic courses in midwifery aimed at professionalising a category of rough hirelings; praiseworthy itinerant agricultural chairs based on a suitably popular and technical-practical approach; philanthropic projects for vocational, intellectual and physical education for blind children of both genders; refined schools of musical instruments set up in orphanages to give their young guests the opportunity to join bands and orchestras; and modern nautical schools for the training of sailors, captains and machinists capable of supporting the development of the navy against the backdrop of the commercial prospects emerging after the opening of the Suez Canal. At the same time, however, we come across shameful differences in salaries between male and female teachers, or even between teachers working in city schools compared to their colleagues in rural schools; school attendance rates plummeting with the arrival of the summer season; fragmented educational pathways producing only low-literacy competences rather than true literacy; squalid, crumbling classrooms lacking the most essential teaching equipment, and teachers who were so cold that they were forced to use school furniture as firewood. As always when dealing with documentation, the picture that emerges exhibits both glimpses of light and large and widespread areas of shade.

The central assumption emerging from all the contributions (and particularly from that of the editor Rossella Del Prete, which is one of the most important essays in the collection, not least because of its length) is the cause-effect relationship between the spread of education and literacy and economic development. Dear to a master like Carlo Cipolla, who enunciated it in his pioneering work Literacy and development in the West (1969), this thesis has enjoyed great historiographic success, and still continues to exert a certain fascination: just think, only to

mention some instances, of the works by Clara-Eugenia Núñez, Literacy and economic growth in Spain (1990), and Boris Nikolaevich Mironov, The effect of education on economic growth. The Russian variant, 19th-20th centuries (1990). In general terms, it can be said that the equation between education and economic growth remains valid as long as it is not seen as an interpretative key applicable anytime anywhere. Nicholas F. R. Crafts' recent studies on the English industrial revolution, for example, have highlighted the backwardness of British educational institutions on the eve of industrialisation, to the extent that England's leadership in this process can in fact be considered to have emerged not thanks to, but in spite of, its educational system. Similarly, Lars G. Sandberg's investigations of Sweden, a country with the highest literacy rates in Europe in the early 1900s, have shown that the education of the working class had minor impact on the performance of the production system, which was mainly set in motion by exogenous factors such as the increase in international demand for timber and the development of emigration. Rather than as a general rule, any interaction between literacy and economic development should ultimately be attuned to the local level. Also because, in some contexts, the cause-and-effect relationship between the two terms of the equation would seem to be reversed, in the sense that it was probably economic development that allowed an education system to take off, which was initially poorly articulated and functional. It was only when growth, which came about as a result of endogenous dynamics, produced appreciable levels of well-being that it became possible to invest in such a 'luxury good' as the education sector. Two other aspects prevent us from making schematic generalisations. The first is that mechanised production does not always require an educated workforce. Returning to the case of the English industrial revolution, the factory system, i.e., the pivot of the industrial revolution, was based on the performance of tasks that, being mere reworkings of craft processes, were not in the least facilitated by mastery of literacy or arithmetic skills. Also, in the case of German industrialisation, which followed and was more technologically advanced than British industrialisation, the thesis that the technical and vocational education of workers was one of its strongest points has yet to be proven. Some have argued that in the German case, production processes in the strict sense of the expression were even held back by excessive investment in the technical education of the workforce. The second aspect concerns the identification of the specific functional relationship between education and development. The extent to which the training of the so-called human capital can influence economic growth is still a matter of debate: one could speak of "allocative" effects, consisting of the greater capability of the educated

worker to seize the opportunities offered by the labour market; and of "direct" effects, concerning the effects of the ability to read and write on productive processes; or, of "indirect" effects, deriving from greater open-mindedness, willingness to learn and adapt to diversified tasks, qualities certainly possessed to a greater extent by educated workers compared to their illiterate counterparts. We are still, however, a long way from acquiring real certainties on these aspects and the debate among scholars is still alive and open.

For these reasons, in addition to providing specialists with vast and in-depth knowledge on the Italian educational system of the last two centuries, the volume is a stimulating contribution to the debate on interesting and highly topical historiographic themes.

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